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Women in South Asia: Status and Right of Women in Punjab of the Indian Subcontinent (Early Vedic Age to Mauryan Period)

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One way to judge the state of the nation is to study the status of women. In the context of South Asian women and their status is being assessed here to highlight the similarity in the conditions faced by women despite the diversities stemming from class culture and locality. This assessment is undertaken on the basis of a select set of quantitative indicators regarding their work, survival, health, education, and political participation. In this connection the paper is attempting to conduct an analysis the status of a women context of Punjab in Indian Subcontinent. It was almost seventy five years back when A.S Altekar remarked that one of the best ways to understand the spirit of a civilization and to appreciate its excellences and realize its limitation is to study the history of the position and status of women in it.[1]The social status of the women of Punjab symbolizes the social spirit of the age. However to draw a conclusion about the position of women is a difficult and complicated problem. It is therefore necessary to trace this position in historical perspective.[2]In the course of Punjab history from Pre Vedic to Mauryan period, there were distinct stages of the rise and fall in the status and role of women.[3] Punjab is traditionally known as a land of brave women who withstood all impediments and emerged tall in all crises. In this study, we wish to judge the real picture through the analysis of social, political and religious institution's efforts are made to understand the position of women in different period of time in ancient Punjab from the birth of a child there were several stages, that a person,in this case a female, passes through in ones life and at each stage several issues are attached to it.

Birth and Childhood:

It is but natural that in the patriarchal form of society that prevailed in Punjab during the early Vedic age sons were more desired than a daughter .The ***Arthārvā Veda*** contains a rite for the birth of a son in preference to daughter.[4]A verse of the Atharva Veda rightly echoes the general desire of the birth of the son and not of the daughter.[5]"***The birth of a girl grant it elsewhere, here grant a boy***."[6] It assume that the birth of a girl was regarded as a misfortune.[7] Expression of sorrow indicated on the birth of a girl.[8]The *Aitāreya Brahmānā* says that whereas a son is the hope of the family,a daughter is a source of trouble for it.[9]We do not come across instances of infanticide in the Punjab of Vedic times.The same prayer has been repeated in another form in which a husband asks for the birth of a male child to his wife .[10] And male children, it is again prayed,be followed by male offspring only and never by female progency.[11]

"***In him a father pays a debt and reaches immorality.***
When he beholds countenance of a son born to him alive."[12]

In this line the birth of a girl in the family did not cause much rejoicing while the boy was lifted up by parents with an expression of joy.The *Brhādārānyākā* Upanished prescribes a ritual for the birth of a scholarly daughter.[13] Even Smayutta Nikaya Says that a talented daughter was better than a son. [14] As late as the time of Ramayana it was maintained that family prosper with daughter. [15]It is seen sometimes reference are stretched out of context to derive meanings. For instance, Altekar has cited an example from the Ramayana where the position of king Janaka is said to be have become intense due to great anxiety like that of poor man who lost all his little money.[16] It is further said her that the father of a girl ,even if he is an exalted king,has to put up with insult not only from his equals but even from his inferiors.[17] It seems Valmiki has made these remarks out of a natural concern that a father has for the wellbeing of her daughter when looking for a suitable match for her marriage and not with a view to comment on social status of daughters as such.For all we know,Sita was highly accomplished princess and all the princes and kings were vying for her hand.[18] There are plenty of references in ancient text on either side. In cultured families no distinction was done between daughters and sons and for the rest, for whom we do not have any literary data, it is presumed that daughters cannot be a source of misery because economically profitable.[19]They helped the family in economic pursuits and brought the bride price at the time of marriage.[20]*Apāstāmbā*[21] says that when a father returned from a journey he recited a mantra for the welfare of his daughter in the same way as he did for the happiness of his sons. An interesting reference is contained in the *Apāstāmbā* where Sachi says that her sons are destroyers of her enemy and her daughter is an empress.[22] It reflects the social thinking of the time when both daughters and sons are given equal importance.

Education :

Education was the best parameter for the competence of a lady. As already pointed out the general features of education in ancient Punjab, we do not get a clear picture of the education system in the early Vedic Age. However, the Rigveda contains numerous reference too highly educated female seers who composed hymns for the Veda and were figuring

prominently throughout. Women enjoyed full rights and regularly participated in religious ceremonies with her husband.In a verse of RigVeda contains "***Ayōgyō vādhā yeshyeōpatnik***" means without a wife, a husband could not take part in Yagna ceremonies,If the woman was not educated how could she recite the mantras; ***Purakriāpaal Kumarinām mohyebandhanmisheyte prārāshārmadhav-2/P-485***[23]We find *Gargi* and *Maitrey* distinguishing themselves in *Brāhmāvidyā*, the highest knowledge.Apālā and Atrēyi were also knowledgeable and authority on women, they suggested that matrimony was not for woman.[24]The status of a woman on the training. She had received in her childhood. Solely because of this reason that we see the position of women in Punjab society gradually declined from the Post-Vedic time onwards.[25]When the child marriage became the practice girls never got a time to receive education and hence their economic utility also decreased considerably. Rather, they become a burden on their in-laws due to their incompetence and hence lost respect.But it was not so in the beginning.All these ladies of early Vedic age naturally belonged to the Sapatsindhu Region.The picture of women's education during the Vedic period appears to be very bright and it seems that women continued to shine in this field throughout the period of our study.[26] However,the *Rigveda* contains numerous references to highly educated female seers who composed hymns for the Veda and were figure prominently throughout.[27] In the *Sārvānukeāmānikā* there are as many as twenty names of female seers to whom respect were to be paid during daily prayers at the time of *Brahmayājnā*.The *Athārvāvedā* clearly says that a woman can succeed in his married life only if she has been properly trained during her student life or *brāhunchāryā*.The prominent names of female seers that occur in the Rigveda include those of Lopamudra,Ghosha[28], Visvavara[29],Sikta[30],Nivari[31] etc. Of these Ghosa who was suffering from a disease and grew up unmarried in the house of her father is found to be composed two hymns dedicated to Asvins in the Rigveda[32].Lopamudra two other female scholars composing hymns in the Rigveda[33]. To Sachi is attributed hymn X .145[34] and to Indrani hymn X.159[35].The *Brahādaranyākā Upanishad*[36] contains an interesting episode of the learned assembly in the court of the philosopher king Janaka where several great sages had assembled for discussion.*Yājā Vālkyā* was one of them who got into a discussion with *Gargi Vachakanvi*. Likewise Atreyi was a student of Vedanta under Valmiki and Agastya. The list of scholars of the Vedic age is too long and there is no reason for us to believe that all these names are without any basis. It simply shows that the education for women was as popular for men.We get reference to two types of female students.The first were known as Sadyovadhus ,who studied up to their marriage and then took over the responsibility of the household[37].Other like those mentioned above were called brahmvadins who remained life long students of philosophy and theology.Besides these subjects there must have been a number of woman who were given education in more practical subjects,though the data available about them is very meagre.We get to know a number of women warriors right from the time of the Rigveda, which mentions a lady named Vispala[38] who given a metallic limb by Asvins.She must have been given complete military training.The tradition of female education in Punjab continued till the time of Panini period is evident from numerous reference to the same by the great grammarian.He says that the same rule applied to the formation of terms connected with male and female student[39]. Thus a female learning Apisali grammar was called Apisala[40]. Likewise a female studying Panini's grammar was called Paniniya.It only indicates the complete autonomy given to this sector by the state despite the fact that liberal royal grants were made to all educational institutions and even individual teachers who commanded immense respect in the society. It may be pointed out that some of the queens of Asóka were highly educated ladies and his daughter Samghamitra even went abroad to preach Buddhism.[41]From the fact that we get reference to educated ladies right up to the end of the period of our study, it is obvious that female education continued from the PreVedic to the Mauryan period in Punjab.[42]

Marriage and Position of Widows :

Marriage is an essential institution of civilized life.We get a beautiful picture of the same in the marriage hymn of Rgveda.[43] Both endogamous and exogamous types of marriages were prevalent in Punjab. The eight forms of marriage were known as we get some idea of the same from the epic in the cases of the marriage of Madri,Gandhari and Kaikayi all of whom belonged to Punjab. Some archaic customs like that of Arsha type of marriage in which bride price is involved were also prevalent over here. The institution of marriage was quite liberal in Punjab within the laid down scriptural norms is reflected from various sources.*The fourteenth Kanda of the Athārvā Veda* is entirely devoted to the hymns connected with marriage. [44]The Taitiriya Brahman[45] clearly lays down that a man without a wife is unholy and unworthy of a performance of sacrifices. Even Panchavinsa Brahmana Says "Heaven and earth were once together, when they were separated; they said, let us bring about a marriage. Let there be cooperation between us".[46] *The Brhādārārānyākā Upanishad*[47] says that the man was alone in the beginning .He was divided into two parts to create man and wife for the continuation of the Punjab.[48]The Māhābhārātā unequivocally says that since the wife is root of three Purushārthā, Dharma,Artha and Kâma,she is the best friend of man, therefore, a home is not a home without wife.[49] Ram Gopal very aptly pointed out that marriage was a highly developed institution in the remote past amongst the Aryans as well as other peoples.[50] Though there is no specific mention of these forms in the early Vedic literature, Some of them are reflected even in the Rigveda.[51] Thus the marriage of Surya describes in the marriage hymn can be termed as a Brahma form of marriage.[52] There is an allusion to Asura form in the marriage of Brahma's wife. The reference to the Gandharva form, thus may be noticed in hymn twenty seven of the tenths mandala.The giving of a daughter to officiating priest also find mention in Rigveda.The epic contains references to various forms of marriage.In the Ramayana Kaikeyi, the wife of Dasartha and mother of Bharata,was married according to the Asura form of marriage. She belongs to Kekaya or the central Punjab.[53]In the Māhābhārtā[54] also we find specific mention of Mādri

being married through the same practice.When Bhishmā went to ask her hand for Pandu Madari's brother Salya ,who was a king of central Punjab, hesitantly laid down the condition of the bride price. It shows the prevalence of the Asura type of marriage in Punjab for a long period though people were aware of the stigma attached to it. It is interesting to note that Kautilya refers to Sulka or bride price even in the case Dharmavivaha[55]or first three forms of marriage also. Since Kautilyapuls marriage in the section on revocation of sale and purchase and states that it can be revoked till the rituals of Panigrahana[56] for the upper castes and consummation for the sutras. Therefore, the possibility of the prevalence of the custom of bride price in all types of marriages in Punjab cannot be completely ruled out.[57]On the other hand Gandhari,the daughter of king Subala of Gandhara and sister of Sakuni, was married to Dhrtarashtra apparently through a Brahma form of marriage because we are told that Sakuni went to Hastinapur to perform the ceremony of her sister's nuptials and gave her decked with ornaments.[58]The famous marriage hymn of the Rigveda provides some good glimpse of the custom as it prevailed in the early Vedic age. It shows that the bride was fully grown up at the time of marriage. The example of Ghosa[59] as one such case is well known. The Arthāsāstrā of Kautilya has reformed to single women who adopted various professional occupation for a living but he also recommends the age of twelve for marriage of a girl.As long as husband was alive, the wife enjoyed all the privileges and ruled over her household.This is made clear in the marriage hymn of the Rigveda itself and repeated by later writer like Panini an Kautilya in their work.One of the most important aspects of women and society is the status of widow the latter grants the farmer .The Rigveda contains Several references to widow but does not throw much light on their condition. In one of the hymns it described the women whose husbands are alive as "***let these women who are not widows, who have good husbands, enter with urgent and butter.Lets women without tears, without sorrow, and decorated with jewels, first proceed to house"***.[60]Here we can easily from the idea of the condition of widows as contrast to these ladies.The Sutras do provide some glimpse on the point. According to Baudhāyā widows should abstain from meat, liquors, honey and salt and should sleep on the ground for a year after the death of her husband.

Similar views are held by Vasistha.[61] &Vishnu Dharam Sutra[62]the latter is of the view that by leading the life of celibate a widow shall attain heaven. This is a marked change from the time of the Rigveda .This condition continued in theory till the end of the Mauryan period, but we do not have any specific examples from Punjab.The most talked about custom is that of widow burning known as Sati. Accordingly a widow was burnt alive along with her dead husband on the funeral pyre.The Rigveda contains a single reference that has been pressed into service by those who support the existence of this custom during the early Vedic period yet they neither belong to Punjab nor have any conclusive evidence on the point. The remains from the Harappan sites have yielded so such evidence. In the literature of the later Vedic period, including the Brahmanas,Upanishads and even the Sutras evidence not remotest evidence on the point. Panini as well as Kautilya is absolutely silent on the issue and so are the inscription of the Maurya-Sunga period .Even the reformers like Asoka are unaware of the existence of any such practice.The vast ocean of the Buddhist literature, including the Jatakas that depict the social life of the period in detail are silent on the point.

Inheritance and Right to Property :

Coming to women's right to property, it must be admitted that it appears to be absent in earlier times as there are no references to support such a view. There is a single reference in the Rigveda where a lady who did not have any brother goes to the court to claim inheritance to her father's property. But at another place in the same text a brother less daughter is given share in the patrimony.[63]In the third chapter of Rigveda,[64] considered oldest part (3.31.2)it appears that even those unmarried girls who had brothers but grew old in the house of parents had some right in their paternal property.[65]Normally the father of a brotherless daughter would try to adopt her as *putrika*.In this arrangement, it was stipulated at the time of marriage that the son born to the daughter shall be considered as son of maternal grandfather and shall also inherit his property.Such as off spring was called *Putrika-putra*.In the Punjab of the Vedic age,[66]it seems,the greed of property was not able to lure men to marry such brotherless girls and it was very difficult for a father to arrange marriage of such daughters.[67] We find reference to this effect in the Rigveda.[68]Even if the father of a brotherless daughter gave assurance to future son-in-law against her son reverting back to maternal grandfather ,a doubt remained in their minds and they were hesitant in taking the hand of such girls[69].A girl who had brothers also seems to have staked claim to patrimony sometimes.[70] On the other hand ***Satapatha Brahmana*** recognizes wife as inheritor of husband's property[71]. The Taitiriyā Samhita on the other hand recognizes a wife as owner of the household goods only.[72]Numerous examples have been quoted by scholars to show that women were like chatter in early Punjab society and husband had complete right over them through the ages.The case of Draupadi being staked during the game of dice by her husband in the Māhābhārtā is too well known to be enumerated.We have a similar reference in the Rigveda also when a gambler stakes his wife in a game of dice.[73]But at the both places the husbands are severely condemned for their action.the first ultimately led to the great war fought in the Kuru fields of Punjab.[74]

Woman in professional and public life :

There is no evidence at all to indicate that either women were confined to the four walls of the house or there were customs like Purdah prevailing in the society to curtail their free movement and participation in the day to day life in any sphere of life.Of the various professions adopted by women, studying and teaching formed a well known occupation right from the early Vedic times. We have already given above the name of several female rshis like

Lopamudra,Sachi, Ghosha,Visvavara etc.[75]We have also referred to female teachers called Upadhyayas and Acharyas as mentioned by Panini.[76]Even the female teachers having co-educational institution are known from the Vedic age and speak for the active participation of women without any inhibition.[77]The women were active in Political participation.In the Ratnāhavimsi ceremony at the time of the coronation of the new king,both mahishi,the chief queen and the Parurkti,the neglected queen play an important role and occupy a significant position.[78]We have the example of women like Vispala and Mudgalani who fought against the enemies shoulder to shoulder with their husbands. Even Kautilya provides a salary equal to that of the highest office to the chief queen.[79]In the epic times in the Ramayana, we find Kaikeyi accompanying her husband Dasaratha to the battlefield and helping him in the difficult time when a wheel of his chariot was broken even at the risk of an injury to her own self.

Concluding Remarks : It appears that women in Punjab during the period under discussion enjoyed high status and command respect in society and were given a great freedom.[80] This made them progressive and broadminded, which resulted in the creation of a healthy society from the Vedic down to the Mauryan period.

Endnotes:

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